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An Elephant In The Household

SUSAN HIGGINS

A recent J. B. Handelsman cartoon¹ portrays a man and woman, presumably a married couple, reading in the comfort of their living room; in her chair she is intent on her book, while on a nearby couch he is happily engrossed in a newspaper. Between them is a small table on which sits a telephone. Standing slightly behind the table, and between the couple, is an elephant with the telephone receiver lifted and held in its trunk. The caption reads, "No, this is the elephant."

For the purposes of this short discussion, the cartoon couple aptly captures the perspective of most American Christians and the congregations to which we belong. That is, an enormous restructuring occurred in God's household during the twentieth century, with consequences for the entire world, consequences which are either already visible or only dimly glimpsed. However, most Western congregations have been slow to recognize and adapt to the new reality; few have begun to explore the newly-ordered household, and almost none within the Stone-Campbell tradition have seriously assessed our ministries and respective corporate lives in light of the dynamic currently flowing through the divine household.

The restructuring (i.e., the presence of the elephant) is, of course, the dramatic shift within the church so that Christians in the West are a numerical and increasingly marginal minority while simultaneously our non-Western brothers and sisters in Christ have experienced explosive growth and congregational vibrancy throughout the two-thirds world. (Indeed, it might be helpful for us to learn to think and speak of ourselves as "minority members" as we adjust to our new status.²) That the Church was reconfigured during the twentieth century has been well-documented by missiologists and church historians; among them, to name just a few of the more prominent Protestant figures, have been Andrew Walls, Lesslie Newbigin, George Hunsberger, Darrell Guder, Wilbert Shenk, Jonathan Bonk, David Bosch, Kwame Bediako, and Lamin Sanneh. The new reality is sometimes assessed as a sign of the "success" of the modern missionary movement with its roots in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, though not everyone would concur. Consider, for example, a short excerpt from an article Darrell Guder published in 1999, which summarized what was already commonly accepted within the mission community:

The statistical review prepared annually by David Barrett for the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* illustrates the paradigm shift graphically. In 1900 Christians in Europe and Northern America comprised 77 percent of the world Christian population. In mid-1998, that same constituency makes up 38 percent of the world Christian population, and by 2025, it will sink to 27 percent. The ancient center of so-called Christian civilization now represents the minority of world Christianity.³

1. J. B. Handelsman, *The New Yorker*, Vol. LXXXI, No. 39 (December 5, 2005): 60.

2. Finding appropriate terms for the changes that have taken place has been challenging for many years. The mission literature of the last several decades has been filled with attempted contrasts like "First World" versus "Two-Thirds World" (or the earlier "Third World"), "Western" vs. "Non-Western," "Foreign" vs. "Indigenous," "International" vs. "National," "mother churches" vs. "daughter churches," all of which bear problematic presuppositions. More recently, "majority Christians" vs. "minority Christians," "majority world" vs. "minority world," and "churches of the Northern hemisphere" vs. "churches of the Southern hemisphere" have appeared; they serve a two-fold purpose in that they enfold the demographic changes while avoiding the most onerous of the presuppositions.

3. Darrell L. Guder, "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Advent, 1998): 3.

Barrett's 2006 figures confirm a steadily diminishing North American and European percentage.⁴

In light of a re-ordered household, then, what are the consequences for those of us who worship in Western congregations? Wilbert Shenk posed questions in 2001 that remain worthy of examination:

Since the Christian majority is now to be found outside the West and missionary initiatives from the churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America are at the cutting edge of the Christian world mission, we must ask: What kind of theology of mission will best serve the global Christian mission in the future? What fresh theological resources can be brought to bear on this new phase of the Christian mission? It is time to listen to voices from the non-Western world that can help construct a theology capable of empowering the global church for participation in the *missio Dei*.⁵

Although our focus here is not "theology of mission," we *are* discussing North American church life; thus, Shenk's questions can be paraphrased: "What patterns of *ekklesia* will best serve North American churches in the future? What fresh resources can be brought to bear on this new phase of our congregational lives? It is time to listen to voices from the non-Western world that can help construct an ecclesiology capable of empowering the North American church for fuller participation in the divine life and mission."

What is truly puzzling is why recognition of these changes and the vast potential they have for Western congregational life has been slow to dawn on our churches, especially North American ones. Among late twentieth-century Western missionary theologians, Lesslie Newbigin's name is one of the more prominent. Newbigin began to clarify contemporary challenges for the West after his return to Britain from India. His seminal work, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, published in 1986, is a tutorial for anyone curious about the West's present religious context, for in it he addresses the ways in which our post-Enlightenment lives have seen the old Christendom patterns dismantled (not that the patterns were ever that faithful to the gospel in the first place), whereas so many churches in the West still attempt to function as if the cultural/religious models of previous centuries remain valid for congregational life. Newbigin left a rich heritage for younger church workers, a heritage constructed on the foundation of (1) a deep and abiding commitment to the Lordship of Christ; (2) an awareness, based on his missionary activities in India, that the only way for the churches of the West to reclaim our identity in Christ is to re-examine our relationships with our respective cultures (that is, to learn to think and be "missiologically" by design and in intent, as we have not done); and (3) broad ecumenical experiences throughout his lifetime with the Lord's disciples around the world.

Neither North American churches (including congregations rooted in the Stone-Campbell tradition) nor North American missions (including the missionaries, structures and activities supported by Stone-Campbell churches) have escaped the West's cultural captivity.⁶ Furthermore, although the churches of the Stone-Campbell tradition have many genuine reasons to affirm our local charitable endeavors as well as our missionaries, mission endeavors, and the impressive amounts of money that have been invested in the missionary enterprise (and in humanitarian relief efforts in this country and elsewhere), we now inhabit a space/time segment in which if church members and missionaries are Americans, then most of the rest of the world associates them with American imperialism; as Philip Wickeri observes:

My point is . . . simply to note that a wide range of analysts from across the political spectrum, both in the United States and overseas, are urging us to consider very carefully the vast implications of our emerging American empire.

4. David Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Missiometrics 2006: Goals, Resources, Doctrines of the 350 Christian World Communions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (January, 2006): 27-30.

5. Wilbert R. Shenk, "Recasting Theology of Mission: Impulses from the Non-Western World," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July, 2001): 98.

6. For an excellent example, see the discussions about nationalism in a recent *Leaven* issue (Volume 14, Number 4, Fourth Quarter, 2005).

I am particularly concerned about the ways in which this empire is now shaping, structuring and dividing world Christianity. Some Christian thinkers have already begun to criticize the new American “theology of empire” that connects our foreign policy to a religiously inspired “mission” which we now promote all over the world. Churches overseas with a wide range of theologies and traditions . . . challenge our churches to give a clear account as to how our mission initiatives stand vis-à-vis our government’s policies. The American empire thus has a direct connection with the reinterpretation of the *missio Dei*. Churches involved in global mission can choose either to ride the coat-tails of empire or criticize the project of empire, but we cannot remain neutral.⁷

If Wickeri is correct that members of churches around the world have begun to ask difficult questions about our missions, our missionaries, and our churches, then what does this mean for our churches, for us?⁸

In short, we have seldom thoughtfully wondered if we ourselves might need to be evangelized. Mission, we say to ourselves, happens in two places: First, it happens “over there” (wherever “there” may be), and second, it happens “out there” in our culture as people are evangelized and come to Christ. Furthermore, after people have joined our congregations, then they become “us” and “we” are distinct from the culture, which is, of course, “out there.”

But when we define our contexts this way, we never get around to asking ourselves to define “here,” since we “know” that we are safely rooted in the church and the culture is “out there.” However, as Charles Taber and many others continue to try to point out to us, culture permeates our minds and lives.⁹ We inhabit culture, create culture, modify culture, live, move, and have our very being in culture. Culture is the set of organizing principles by which we live; the unquestioned assumptions we have about ourselves—how to do things, who we are, who other folks are. That is, we ourselves *are* the culture; it’s not “out there,” it’s *within* us and our churches, which manifest aspects of the same traits that dominate the culture. To list a few, consider the following: a move toward an individualized, feel-good, privatized religion; a national context of religious “shoppers” who walk through the religious marketplace like we walk through the malls; a strong identification with the political apparatus of the state; and a marginalized identity. George Hunsberger has said:

It is well documented that two things have become true of the churches of North America. On the one hand, we are largely accommodated to the culture of which we are a part, and we live largely in terms of its most basic assumptions and values. Lesslie Newbigin has demonstrated this with respect to the undercurrents of the facts-values, and public-private dichotomies in Western culture generally. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon have observed, that the churches’ “primary social task is to underwrite American Democracy”, and that they tend to operate as though they have “no fundamental quarrel with the powers-that-be”. The churches have, to use Newbigin’s terms, *accepted relegation to the private realm*, and in the process have become voluntary societies for the nurture of a private faith option. The churches have also, to use the terms of Hauerwas and Willimon, *accepted the role of a religious civic club*, and now run errands for America and, in the process confuse citizenship and discipleship.¹⁰

If we accept that these missiologists and others speak prophetically, then we within the Stone-Campbell churches have a challenging task before us. The good news, of course, is the best news of all—that the gospel not only judges every culture and its peoples but also proclaims the Lordship of Christ, which redeems

7. Philip L. Wickeri, “Mission from the Margins,” *International Review of Mission*, Vol. 93, No. 369 (April, 2004): 190-191.

8. See Chandra Mallampalli’s article “World Christianity and ‘Protestant America’: Historical Narratives and the Limits of Christian Pluralism” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (January, 2006): 8-13.

9. Charles R. Taber, *The World Is Too Much With Us* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001).

10. George R. Hunsberger, “Birthing Missional Faithfulness: Accents in a North American Movement,” *International Review of Mission*, Vol. 92, No. 365 (April, 2003): 145-146.

us all. Furthermore, in repentance, we can claim the freedom that lies at the heart of the Stone-Campbell Movement, in which we understand ourselves to be a “movement” within the one Church; free to enjoy the riches other Christian histories and traditions offer; and free, also, to examine others’ contributions in light of scripture. But, in addition, and at this historical juncture, we can recognize and act on the extraordinary privilege we have to examine ourselves and to craft ourselves and our ministries more obediently with the help of our sisters and brothers from the non-Western churches. They have insights, critiques, questions, patterns of ministry, and leadership models from which we have much to learn.

With that in mind, let us briefly reflect on three ways in which the new Christian reality might be helpful to us in our congregational life, specifically within congregations of the Stone-Campbell tradition. What follow are merely suggestions, attempts to open the conversation to different thought patterns and to create space for new ways of thinking. Two words of caution are in order: First, there is no “how-to” manual on the bookshelves with a magical fix-it between its covers; rather, the alternatives herein would demand our best minds; a willingness to listen carefully to our brothers and sisters who will in all likelihood sometimes speak quite disconcerting truths to us; a sustained re-engagement with scripture in the spirit of a “missiological perspective”¹¹; a determination from our leadership (among whom I include educators) to persevere toward a new and truly creative future; congregational members who value our heavenly citizenship more than our national citizenship; and a host of other factors too exhaustive to list here. Second, what is effective in one location may be completely inadequate in another, though we will all profit if we can learn to share our stories of pilgrimage, inquiry, debate, encounter, and learning.

POSSIBILITY ONE: RE-ENVISIONING LEADERSHIP FORMATION

Leadership development is no less an issue for us than it is for emerging fellowships worldwide. We spend enormous quantities of time in our seminaries, periodicals, conferences, retreats and other settings fretting about preacher burnout, kinds of leadership models, characteristics of a good pastor, etc. What if we asked ourselves if we could learn from leaders in other settings and then actively sought them out, and became their students? Jonathan Bonk recounts a conversation he had in southern Ontario with two Nepalese Christians who had gone to Canada to report on their missionary work in Nepal. Before students can qualify for graduation from Nepal Bible College they “must establish three churches.” Bonk continues:

Such a requirement . . . would be remarkable enough in any country. In Nepal, with laws calling for stiff, one-to-three-year prison sentences for new converts and their proselytizers, it borders on the unbelievable.

When I asked Sundar whether this requirement did not get his students into trouble, he replied with a smile that it did indeed, and that several of his students were at that moment serving prison sentences. When I further inquired what role teachers played in assisting students to fulfill this requirement, he replied, again with a smile, that teachers—including himself—accompanied the students on their weekend evangelistic forays. Did teachers ever get into trouble, I asked? “Oh yes,” he said and proceeded to relate the story of an evangelistic itineration six weeks earlier. Sundar and his students had been seized by angry officials, stripped of their clothes, tied by their wrists to the overhanging branch of a large tree, and left—with a goodly supply of leeches—to ponder their religious enthusiasm throughout the night.¹²

It would seem reasonable to observe that leaders like Sundar have a great deal to teach us about leadership formation, discipleship, faithfulness in trials, and other areas. Perhaps Stone-Campbell preachers and professors might benefit from sustained interaction with Christian leaders whose contexts have forced them

11. See Terry Muck’s editorial “The Missiological Perspective: What Does It Mean to Read the Bible Missiologically?” in *Missiology*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (October, 2003): 395-396.

12. Jonathan J. Bonk, “Thinking Small: Global Missions and American Churches,” *Missiology*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April, 2000): 150-151.

to encounter and respond to the demands of the gospel with decisions and behaviors that differ from our own. Perhaps by exploring the pages of scripture with such teachers we could begin to learn how to re-evaluate our settings from perspectives which would be helpful to us all. For instance, because we have believed the national lie that there is a separation between church and state and that churches should concentrate on “spiritual” matters, we have often failed to recognize that around us lies staggering evidence that all “spiritual” matters exist within the very physical realms of how we live. What might a Sundar say to us if he were our conference keynote speaker?

POSSIBILITY TWO: RE-ENVISIONING DISCIPLESHIP

How do we ensure the faithful discipleship of our youth? Our approach has historically been the commonly shared patterns of Sunday schools, VBS programs, youth retreats and weekend rallies, camps, and other activities in which our young are segregated from adults, except for staff and volunteers.¹³ Then we spend great quantities of time structuring viable, effective youth programs; planning youth worship; seeking qualified youth ministers; scouring the newest publications about “how” to reach young people; and recruiting adult sponsors. In effect, by mimicking in our churches the educational structures of our nation’s public schools, we have further isolated our youth from the most significant role models they could possibly have on the relatively few days each year the entire congregation is gathered. What if our Sunday school classes spanned the age ranges in our congregations, as they do in some traditions? What if we looked carefully at how Christians in other countries point their young to Christ? Our mature members might be pressed to articulate the faith in vocabularies that youngsters could understand; our families might extend their links to other families; our widowed and divorced members might discover new ways of “belonging” again; our children might “catch” the how-to of Christian discipleship in new and unexpected patterns.

Such approaches can be frightening, because they are uncharted waters for us. But if we want to reach our young people in such a way that they are well-grounded in their faith by the time they are young adults, then from the time they are toddlers they need to be surrounded by fellow believers of all ages; they need to hear first-hand people’s struggles and how God has been faithful in those struggles; they need to look at eighty-year-old married couples and see lifetime partnerships and covenantal fidelity displayed in the lives of people they know well and subsequently trust; they need to watch as adults wrestle with congregational tensions in ways that put others’ needs first.

Several years ago, Walter Brueggemann published a book on evangelism in which he established three populations that scripture targets: strangers/outside (i.e., “others,” whoever they may be), insiders (i.e., “ourselves”), and the children of believers. About the last group, he writes:

Here the matter of evangelism is more complex and more difficult than it is in the other cases. Both from the text itself, and from our own experience with our own children as believers, it is clear that there is no single, decisive meeting which will suit such children, for nurture and incorporation are not so easy with our children. Nurture and incorporation require not a one-time meeting, but an ongoing conversation, whereby the child-en-route-to-adult begins, a little at a time at one’s own pace, to affirm and claim the “news” which defines the community. . . . This conversation, unlike the previously cited meetings, is never done with. It goes on and on. Indeed, I share the view that the conversation never reaches a fixed, finished conclusion, for the conversation itself is the very reality of evangelism.¹⁴

13. I want to state clearly that I am a grateful graduate of church Sunday schools, VBS programs, retreats, youth group functions, and camps. My point here is that whereas such structures may have been effective previously in our culture’s history, they may not be adequate to help our youth now. The social dislocations which accompany high mobility, individuality, independence, freedom, etc., have fractured our communal lives at many levels.

14. Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 94-95.

A few pages later, we hear him say:

We may wonder if a more public faith, a faith which takes a larger, critical view of culture is possible, and if with a larger public view, buoyancy for discipleship as citizens is a possibility. Speaking quite concretely and practically, I wonder if faith as we have known it is now even possible for our young. I should want to argue that insofar as our young are practitioners of secular indifference, or adherents to legalistic individualism, they are candidates for an evangelical conversation.¹⁵

POSSIBILITY THREE: RE-ENVISIONING OUR LIFE TOGETHER

If we could learn to think and act “missiologically” toward ourselves in light of the vast changes that have taken place in God’s worldwide household, if we could learn to ask (and answer!) what the gospel requires of us in the public domain as well as in the “private, religious” domain we have long inhabited, we might attend more carefully to our confessional life together and how our common life intersects with the lives of Christians in other communities elsewhere in the world.

Years ago I met a wonderful Chinese man who had gone to Great Britain to obtain a theological degree at one of the British universities; two years previously, when he had left home for his studies, his wife was pregnant. He had not yet seen his first child, a son, because the authorities, fearing he would not return if his wife traveled abroad with him, refused to issue a visa for her. Both he and his wife had grown up in strong Christian families. As he prepared to return to China, I asked him what I should pray for. His reply was that it would be most helpful if he and his wife would not be sent to jail at the same time, since they were concerned about the upbringing of their child. His father and grandfather before him had both served years in the Chinese prisons for their faith and their preaching, and he himself anticipated that as he resumed his pastoral responsibilities in the small southern Chinese city where they resided he would be arrested. For him, the question was not “if,” but “when.” Because the church in their community was quite small, and because both sets of grandparents were old and in frail health, he and his wife were very worried about the real possibility that if they were imprisoned simultaneously for significant periods of time, their son would be separated from the Christian community by the party officials. I have continued to pray for him and his family; furthermore, I have followed developments in the southern Chinese provinces and churches with an understanding different from what I had before I knew him. The mission community overflows with similar examples; we have much to learn from the narrators and their stories.¹⁶ Many Christians in other contexts who are not caught up in the intricate web of distinctions between what is “public” and what is “private” have carefully counted the costs of their discipleship and made their decisions. From them, we might learn to live as more faithful disciples in the kingdom Jesus has already inaugurated.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we are greatly blessed to live during this period of history, for in God’s providence we can not only exult in the salvific work of Jesus but also rejoice in the riches which the Spirit produces as the Spirit accomplishes God’s purposes in the world. My hope and prayer is that churches in the West may be poised to respond in obedience and humility to the remarkable challenges and opportunities of this hour.

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15. Ibid., 97.

16. See Gary Burge’s article “What I Have Learned from Middle Eastern Christianity” in the *Evangelical Mission Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (January, 2006): 98-104. Near the conclusion he says, “The needs of our people may indeed include social issues and justice concerns. As a church, we need to take a stand for these issues. I want to be a different sort of Christian, one for whom kingdom work goes beyond business as usual. I want to be a different sort of Christian who believes that promoting the kingdom of God means advancing its truth and values into the world. And if I must be an outrageous advocate . . . it’s okay.”